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ABSTRACT

There is really no theoretical difference between standard education and distance education; the difference is in the mediation of the transactions between teachers and students. Distance education writing courses can be successful provided the instructor uses a strong text, states his or her guidelines clearly, tutors well on computer, and offers conferencing through the computer. An instructor, new to this type of instruction, sketched out his course, beginning with a syllabus and assignment plan that started with writing for a personal audience. Tutoring, including commenting on written assignments, is naturally more difficult in a distance environment since teachers cannot write comments and corrections directly on student papers. Instead, instructors might follow a few basic conventions such as bracketing difficult passages, writing a few interpolated remarks in capitals, and writing a few clearly marked global comments at the end. Much of the novelty of this approach lies in its attempt to combine composition-teaching practice with conversation-theory underpinnings in a computer mediated environment; the central activity of this system is conferencing, which encourages active and willing involvement as well as cognitive growth. It might include both asynchronous or e-mail/bulletin-board-type conversations as well as synchronous or real-time discussions. One of the most difficult parts of managing the course is communicating the goals and guidelines of the assignments. (Contains 15 references and three appendixes, including a diagram for distance education writing, an interview assignment, and comments on a student text.) (TB)

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Strategies for Computer-Based Distance Writing Courses

Presentation for Conference on College Composition and Communication
San Diego, 1993 (revised 1994)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

I'd like to begin by relating some history of my own involvement in teaching writing at a distance, an activity I never saw myself taking part in. I think this attitude of "how did I ever get involved in this?" may be shared by many of us who are now engaging with this traditionally out-of-the-main-stream type of teaching. However, my inauguration into teaching at a distance may have been different in a significant way. Judging from the experience of other writing teachers expressed in e-mail conversations, queries, and anxious pleas for help witnessed on Internet lists such as MBU-L (Megabyte University at Texas Tech University) and DEOS-L (the Distance Education On-line Symposium at Penn State University), a usual pattern is that the decision to move writing instruction into a distance education mode has been taken at upper administrative levels, and the responsibilities have been handed down successive ranks until someone--often the "computer person" of the department--is asked to prepare the course and teach it.

But I was not commissioned in such a way nor was ever a committed student of distance education. This movement has concentrated mostly on adults continuing their formal education, and has roots in "correspondence study" that has sought for more than a hundred years to bring education and personal advancement to a home and job bound populace. This sort of extension education has developed quite a separate identity, partly as a result of the vision of important founders like William Lighty of the University of Wisconsin and William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago, and partly because establishment educators looked down their noses at correspondence teaching, considering it a suspicious kind of education.

My own path toward distance education began in the networked classroom, as I thought and read about computers and writing, and daily experienced the unique features of a "virtual classroom" (I realize that this term is copyrighted by New Jersey Inst. of Tech, but it is so descriptive of this new environment that I will continue to use it, with acknowledgement, of course). An interesting question began then to form in my mind: "With our writing environment software, what difference does it make if the students in my class were in the same lab, or in different labs, or at far remote locations?" Communication between workstations could be made to happen the same way, and guidance materials and lessons I used in regular networked classes could be adapted for students at a distance, perhaps with somewhat enriched explanations and

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more examples.

After I had ruminated abstractly on these issues for several years, Paul Ranieri, a colleague who was then Director of our Writing Program, discussed with me the university's desire to increase and enhance its distance education offerings. We conceived of using computers as a means of efficient text transfer for our televised writing classes, which were still relying on the postal system to gather students' texts. I introduced my "virtual classroom at a distance" idea, and Paul and I then undertook to persuade the university to support a pilot course with ten students who would be able to dial into our local area network at the same time, access our Daedalus instructional System, and participate in a distance education class in composition. The University agreed to the project, and last spring five students enrolled in a pilot 103 or "Composition I" course delivered primarily by computer and accessed by modem connection to our instructional LAN. (Appendix A)

It wasn't until shortly before the class began, when I consulted several standard distance education sources, that I recognized that my approach fit well with contemporary rethinking of distance education theory that had been built largely on the work of educational psychologists. Holmberg, Shale, Garrison, and others have emphasized the nature of education as essentially a transactional process, in which, as Shale writes, "Private knowledge gets converted to public knowledge through critical reflection and critical discourse....education...is a process of validating private knowledge" (335). There is really no theoretical difference between standard education and distance education; the difference is in the mediation of the transactions between teachers and students. This transactional model, growing out of conversation theory in education, runs parallel to much of the social epistemic thinking behind pedagogy in composition/rhetoric today. Shale specifically develops the importance of the social dimension of the educational conversation, stressing that the transactions taking place include peers within a learning community as well the teacher, encouraging a multi-dimensional, realistic forum where learners can continuously test and validate their private knowledge and negotiate meaning in readings, activities, and writing tasks.

As I gained experience, then, with networking in the computer classroom, I equipped myself to think about distance education in combination with my general approach to teaching writing. Putting this theory into practice challenged my abilities as a teacher--and productively, on the whole. I wanted to include the greatest amount of interactivity and collaboration possible within the limits of the course, and in general I think the course process achieved that goal. This process relied heavily on a strong text, on clear written guidelines, on tutoring, and on discussion through computer conferencing. These are the same constituent parts that make up all of my writing courses; the difference here was not in kind but degree, with the distance course posing special challenges to process and communication.

The choice of a main text was clear to me from the outset. For all my writing classes--from freshman to graduate level--I had for several years used a text which I

had found flexible in format, rich in content, and profound in its comprehensive understanding of writing and teaching writing: Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's *A Community of Writers*. Also, it arranges its units, activities, and assignments so that the writer holds a conversation with herself in the first phases of the course through personal, private composing, then gradually expands her audience to include others in the class-community and beyond. Thus the text facilitates and encourages writers' involvement with both simulated and real audiences; it acts as an effective framework for what Holmberg calls "guided didactic conversation," which describes a large part of the process we can see at work at all levels: that is, in traditional, local computer-based, and distance education courses.

Following the lead of the Elbow-Belanoff text, I sketched out the course, beginning with a syllabus and assignment plan that started with writing for a personal audience, and later turned outward toward a public, rhetorical forum. Since it's more difficult for a teacher to personally interpret and explain assignments in a distance course, written instructions had to be detailed and full.

Tutoring, including commenting on written assignments, is naturally more difficult in a distance environment; teachers cannot write comments and corrections directly on student papers. I used a few basic conventions, like putting interpolated remarks and corrections all in capitals, and including a global comment clearly marked at the end. Actually, I found that this mode of commenting fits well with my inclinations as an evaluator; I think we as teachers write too much and too many corrections on students' papers to the neglect of discursive evaluation. The limitations this communication system puts on my scribbling over student work is good overall, although it does take longer on the average to respond to individual texts.

Much of the novelty of the course concept, I believe, lay in its attempt to combine composition-teaching practice with conversation-theory underpinnings in a computer-mediated environment; the central activity of this system is conferencing, which encourages active and willing involvement as well as cognitive growth. Conferencing in my regular computer courses includes both asynchronous or e-mail/bulletin-board-type conversations as well as synchronous or real-time discussions. Though the success of the pilot has been difficult to measure objectively, its affective goal--involving students in a learning conversation through new means and eliciting their enthusiasm and dedication--was indeed realized.

Several aspects of pedagogy changed significantly in process and format, as might be expected. One of the most difficult parts of managing the course was communicating the goals and guidelines of the assignments. I had hoped that detailed assignment messages combined with guidance in the text would suffice to explain what students should do. But several of the less experienced users needed additional help in understanding what the actual demands of the task were. Conferencing helped here, especially discussions that happened in real-time, enabling me to clarify the steps they needed to go through. (See Appendix B for a brief course plan, Interview Assignment

description, and on-line synchronous discussion with students about the assignment.)

Another problem was commenting effectively on students' "papers." In traditional courses, teachers customarily mark comments and corrections directly on the pages, and usually add a global or general comment at the end with the grade. Since distance students' writing is presented in electronic files, I had to develop a convention for marking and responding clearly. Thus, I used the type of marking illustrated in Appendix C: square brackets are put around errors, mistakes, or stylistically dubious words or passages, with an asterisk before the opening bracket for easier identification. My interlinear queries or comments appear in capitals, as do my final global remarks. I do not seek to identify and correct each mistake, since to do so would be to burden the text and make it barely readable, as well as take too much of my time; I do try to allow the writer to know where problems exist and what my "readerly" thoughts are as I experience the text. Reflecting on this whole practice, I cannot say that commenting in this way is really a "problem." More and more it has become part of my pedagogy to limit my interference in writers' discourse and increase their responsibility for making their language communicate accurately to me and others. The electronic response mode I use actually encourages my brevity and the student's analytical reading, which can both be regarded as good things.

Of course, not everything worked out as I hoped or expected. Many details of the course related to the particular circumstances surrounding it worked against us. Chief among these was difficulty getting the course started. Institutional inertia and the strangeness of new undertakings meant that the course started late and somewhat confusedly, and that students, in view of their other responsibilities, couldn't commit as much time and effort as they needed to.

This and other particular features of our distance course point out the infinite ways each distance class can be different from every other, to a greater extent than classroom courses differ among themselves. Indeed, in this context, much course planning must await a reasonably clear definition of the full course environment and clientele. I do think however that there are some general suggestions that can be made that should apply to most distance writing courses. These are strategies for approaching significant tasks that prospective teachers face. The suggestions are offered not as final words but as attempts to establish computer-based distance writing instruction as an educational process that should become increasingly stable and useful as time goes on:

SUGGESTIONS FOR BEGINNING DISTANCE EDUCATORS

ALLOW your first course to be a pilot--

Work on scheduling assignments

Learn likely pace of students' processes--

- accessing and using communication technology
- doing assignments
- interacting during drafting, revising, responding, etc.
- conferencing and using e-mail
- conferencing between teacher, student on texts

ANTICIPATE that some variables can't be predicted; plan to be flexible--

- Expect various levels of expertise and confidence
- Allow for slower learning because of technological overhead
- Expect hardware, software problems, breakdowns
- Be aware of impact of external circumstances on students

BUILD SOME face-to-face contact into course--

- Helps establish community bond, build commitment
- Makes collaboration more natural
- Offers efficient way to transfer information

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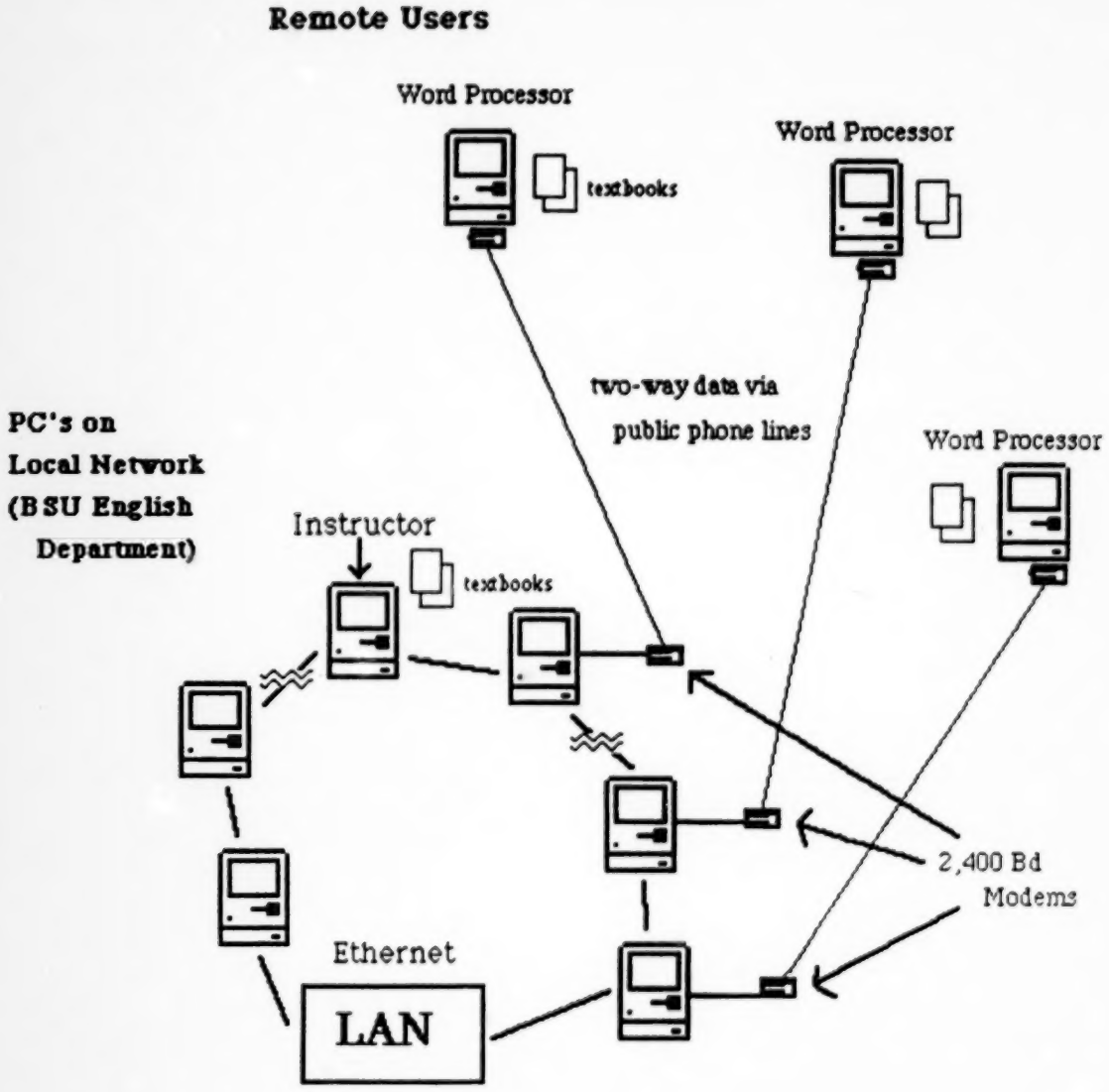
APPENDIX A



Software:

Daedalus Instructional System

- E-Mail
- Bulletin Board
- Real-time Conferencing
- Pre-writing--Revision CAI
- Word Processing
- File Transfer

Pilot Computer-Based Distance Education Environment for Writing Instruction

APPENDIX B

REAL-TIME CONFERENCE--CLARIFYING INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENT

Participants: (all dialed in to English Lab, Ball State; students' actual names have been masked)

Newbold	At home, Anderson
Lab Manager	In English Lab, Muncie
Student A	In dorm room, Indiana Academy of Arts and Sciences, Muncie
Student B	At home, Anderson

Start of conference MAIN

1[message number] 0 ·
Student A:
Is anybody out there?

2 1[number of message being replied to, when indicated] ·
Lab Manager:
we are having problems ..hope to get everything working soon

3 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
I'm on, Student A. Is anyone else but Student A and me here?

4 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
Well, Student A, looks like you and me. How are you coming with your collage?

7 0 ·
Student A:
So far it is going ok, I plan on transfering it to you tomorrow.

8 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
Student A! Glad you're still here. I jumped over to Contact and saw your earlier sign off message. Are you still there?

9 0 ·
Student A:
Yes, I was about to give up, but I thought that I would give

it another try.

10 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
I'm not really sure what's causing the problem. But the lab manager rebooted the machines and they started working. I hope we can make them more reliable in the future. At any rate, have you read the assignment for Unit 2 yet?

11 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
Student A--or anybody--are you there?

12 0 ·
Student A:
Yes, I was just checking something in my book. I had a question for you about the interview. What are you looking for in the areas of description. Are you more interested in a few topics throughly covered, or do you want a lot of topics overviewed?

13 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
ANYBODY who reads this. I'm going to log off for a few minutes and try to contact Student B, who said he would be here tonight. It's now 7:53. I'll be back--don't leave.

14 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
Student A--I'll wait a few minutes before ;logging off.

15 0 ·
Student B:
Hi, Student A! I'm on. The modem wouldn't answer earlier.

16 0 ·
Webster Newbold:
Good, now that Student B's here we can proceed with questions about the interview. Student A, could you clarify yours a bit. What do you mean by "descriptions"?

17 0 ·
Student A:
Well, I feel that I would make my paper too long if I described everything completely out. I could either cut out a few sections, making it more through, or I could be less specific and cover more aspects of the person.

18 0 ·
Student A:
I guess that I am just asking for your preference.

19 17 ·
Webster Newbold:
Student A, I think I see what you're aiming at. There are 4 question areas on pp. 34 and 35 that you might go into. The INTERVIEW can go into them all even if you only discuss one or two in the actual REPORT. Editing of the interview material is a major task in this assignment. You need to decide what material is important and present it to your reader. Is that a little better?

20 19 ·
Webster Newbold:
Hey, Student B, are you with us?

21 0 ·
Student A:
Yes. That helps. Did you ever decide on how you were going to give us grades. Either the mail message or the ret file?

22 21 ·
Webster Newbold:
Yes, Student A, I think I'll make replies by Contact Mail at first, since these can be private. If we decide to change later we can.

24 0 ·
Student B:
If I understand correctly, we're to write a "collage" style draft of information gleaned from the interview. Then, we're revise by asking specific questions of ourselves and write a final report of 500 to 1000 words. This interview is to explore the kinds of writing our subject uses and the method he employs to write as well as our conclusions about the subject's writing process.

26 24 ·
Webster Newbold:
Student B, I wish everyone had your quick grasp of writing tasks. Yes, that's the assignment in a nutshell. Do you have anyone in mind who might be a good subject?

28 26 ·
Student B:
I had in mind Milton C, a staff writer for Public Relations at Delco Remy. He's been on the staff for several years and is an admired writer of press releases, news articles and public relations kinds of missives. (grin)

29 28 ·
Webster Newbold:
Sounds liekke the perfect candidate, Student B. It's surprising how many people never think much about HOW they approach a writing task--they just do it. I know that I didn't analyze myself very much until I began to use Elbow's text consistently. Then I found myself using freewriting and general exploratory techniques when doing my professional writing tasks. I guess old dogs are never really too old to learn.

APPENDIX C

COMMENTS INTERPOLATED IN STUDENT TEXT

Interview Report March 30
Christine, instructor at the Indiana Academy
by Student A

"I began to write for myself in high school, but I felt the desire to write at a much earlier age." Christine is a nonconformist poet. Her original character and perseverance allows her to bring out her past experiences in innovative forms. She emerges to me as an independent writer, one who writes from within. Any weaknesses in her demeanor were totally concealed to me....

From the impression that I get, Christine is determined to enrich our *[societies] bearing on writing. She has overcome an extremely difficult "writers *SP[trail]." "My teacher told me that I would never be a writer, and that I should stick with music, or something else. My *[e]nglish teacher was my first challenge. She told me that *[e]nglish wasn't a career for women. I felt insulted!" This wasn't the only attack to her writing either. "I was once evaluated by a severe critic. He created a writers block in me, because he was so severe. It even lasted for a few years, I just couldn't write." *[Her continued writing is a direct relation of her inner strength, the strength demand of a true writer. I'M NOT CLEAR ON THIS WHOLE SENTENCE, ESP. THE USE OF "CONTINUED"; PROBABLY NEEDS REVISING AS A WHOLE]....

She replied, "I try not to, I really try not to. I really guard against that." I get the feeling that Christine isn't trying to teach her students her writing, but rather teach them how to write so they can bring forth their own originality and style. In a *[persuasive- I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN, BUT A STRONGER WORD WOULD BE BETTER HERE, LIKE "COERCIVE"] society such as ours, I consider this a highly respected trait....

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THIS IS A REALLY GOOD INTERVIEW! IT EXPRESSES THE WRITING ETHOS OF YOUR SUBJECT QUITE WELL AND GIVES YOUR OWN EVALUATION, TOO. I FEEL AS THOUGH I UNDERSTAND WHAT CHRISTINE DOES WHEN SHE WRITES POETRY.

IN A FEW PLACES YOUR LANGUAGE COULD BE MORE ACCURATE. IF YOU REVISE I'LL RE-EVALUATE YOUR GRADE. ALL IN ALL, THIS IS PRETTY STRONG IN THE WAY IT MEETS THE WRITING PURPOSE OF THE ASSIGNMENT.
TENTATIVE GRADE: B+